

# The war on/in higher education

## by the editors

Media studies and communications have been one of the growth areas in U.S. education over the past 30 or more years. This has tended to protect the fields from some of the downsizing and stagnation seen elsewhere, but now every aspect of education is open to decline. As states drastically reduce their contribution to public higher education, tuition has skyrocketed. As corporate management models are pushed harder and harder, any semblance of faculty governance is undermined. Using capitalist thinking, politicians and administrators see students as “customers.” Because students and their parents are now paying hefty tuition and expenses, they think they are buyers. Teachers are just retail agents, there to serve what the consumer wants.

The irresistible tide of neoliberalism is now eroding the banks of academe in the United States. We’ve seen the decades long war on K-12 education deteriorate children’s future. Now colleges are facing the crisis with the most drastic effects on students who have to deal with self-financing their degrees incurring great debt. Upon graduation, if they’re lucky, they face a dubious job market in which they are unlikely to be able to pay off the accumulated liability (neatly enforced by federal law walling that debt off from bankruptcy) anytime soon.

This isn’t an accident. It is part of a plan, appropriately called the Shock Doctrine by Naomi Klein in her book of that name. As Klein explains recent history, by creating a crisis, the powerful can then push through their longterm agenda with minimal opposition. Public anxieties go up, from an actual event turned into an overblown perceived threat (say 9/11) or a financial meltdown managed that state and financial leaders have to manage to “save” capitalism (without asking why or how). Then the state offers quick fixes in the form of magic bullets and these then become new public policy and practice. The war in Iraq was such a folly, and now academe is a new real estate for capitalist exploitation.

Thus there’s a flurry of new “problems” and new “solutions,” all within the neoliberal framework. Students can’t enroll in the courses they need to finish due to overcrowding and under resourcing? Change the requirements so they can graduate! Instructional expenses are too high? Increase productivity with MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses)! Faculty resistance to change from

on high? Ignore shared governance. Administrators out of touch? No problem, the same model that shapes a capitalist market corporation should work just fine for higher education.

At the heart of a modern industrial system, higher education is a crucial social pivot point. This concept was recognized by the 1960s student movement in the United States, and (way too optimistically) that movement also thought that it formed a fulcrum that could change the system. In retrospect, now we can see that the fact of the Vietnam War and a universal military draft for young men built pressure within the college sector that student activists used to push for all kinds of change. With those two conditions ended, the urgency disappeared. But the basic fact remains: higher education *is* crucial, and getting control of it and setting its goals and agenda are once again undergoing critical change.

But to understand what we see going on now, we need some basic reference points as to what is really going on. We think there are at least four key parts of the process. One is the Shock Doctrine of proclaiming a crisis, one so profound that immediate action is needed, with loud declarations that market solutions can solve the problems. Two is the offering of vague Magic Bullets to solve the crisis. These usually turn out to be untested, speculative fixes—often backed by venture capitalists or other interested parties with a financial stake in the matter. Three is to Maintain a Churn of activity and controversy so that no one proposed solution gets carefully considered and analyzed. Four is to Ignore or Hide the real economic situation of higher education and especially the labor issues involved.

We've seen the results of this strategy in K-12 education. Drum beating about genuine poor performance by some schools and students was used to turn public attention away from longterm problems of communities and economics. Quick fix educational policy makers proclaimed charter schools the Magic Bullet answer. Now that we have some track record on that move, it's clear that a few charter schools, actually very few, work well, but overall they do no better than what we had before. And often their performance is worse, and they produce new problems such as further segregating students by race and class. And, it turns out, many have a remarkably high failure rate, often closing down within a few years. Similarly, No Child Left Behind was passed as a solution on the Federal level, over the thoughtful objections and questions of experienced teachers. It's turned into a testing agenda nightmare that serves no one: not students, not parents, not teachers, not communities. Faced with this, a new proclamation from the right wing think tanks is that the teacher makes all the difference, so we just need those who are "succeeding" and the freedom to fire all the rest.

How does this calculated churn work for higher education issues? Currently MOOCS provide a good example. A few pilot "courses" offered online have "enrolled" tens of thousands of students for a masterful remote lecture course. But such a course is not for credit, not meeting any perceived need, has a

massive attrition rate, and is free. Dazzled by the numbers, and the low cost (free, basically), politicians and pundits immediately took up the cause to push for colleges to start using MOOCs. The University of Virginia provided the most dramatic example of this folly. The head of the Board of Regents (Trustees), a real estate entrepreneur, finding the university's new president not moving fast enough in implementation, had her fired. Fortunately the faculty and students pushed back big time, and the decision was reversed. It turned out the head of the board, with no previous experience in higher ed administration, had simply read an incredibly optimistic opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal* about MOOCs, and that was enough to convince her that Virginia had to move fast and furiously to implement it.

On a recent panel at the Union for Democratic Communication/Project Censored conference, Anthony Nadler gave an excellent summary of the different motivating factors at work in the MOOC phenomenon. He sees different players with different ideas and goals:

1. Egalitarian and digital utopians see MOOCs as offering access to high quality teachers for all, globally, and without institutional barriers.
2. Market solution people see MOOCs as a model of efficiency. Essentially it's a broadcast model of one to many, one-way communication.
3. Branding campaign administrators see it as perfect for getting high recognition, especially among international students.
4. Managers engage with it as fulfilling a vision they have of being able to manage everything, including now the teacher/student interface that had previously been personal and site-based.
5. Some journalists and pundits and parents are star struck by the celebrity culture aspect of MOOCs: the superstar prof performing for you in a virtual venue.
6. Silicon Valley power people see it as embodying their values.
7. Venture capitalists see it as a new opening opportunity for investment now for a big payoff later.

What we can see in the discussion of MOOCs is a mix of some folks with sincere beliefs, others with lots of optimistic hopes, and a certain amount of cynical or self-interested advocacy. There's also a peculiar kind of collapsed thinking. MOOCs are found to be a magic bullet solution for all kinds of different problems. Precisely where we might find reasoned discussion, exploratory questioning, and thorough vetting of claims—an academic setting—we now find alarms, wishful thinking, and stampedes.

Sincere teachers try to make sense of the phenomenon, while politicians and outsiders try to create a panic for implementation. Lost along the way is history and memory (in fact, there have been long-standing distance-education projects for decades: what could be learned from that?). Smothered are any common sense pedagogical questions: Who evaluates student learning and how do they do so? What kinds of learning lend themselves to this approach and which ones really do not? How does this work for younger

students, or those struggling with college level education, or those needing advice? Who sets the core curriculum in such a system? Who is responsible and who is accountable for success and failure, for problems and solutions? The pundit chatter never seems to go this far into the matter of how such courses might function. Nor do the politicians who promise instant solutions.

Against these core questions of classroom quality and the nature of education, economics become a crucial factor. The actual stratification of higher education reveals “traditional” learning and experience is the norm at the top tier elite colleges and universities. At the bottom are vocational based schools: both community colleges and for-profit outfits that seem more connected to market realities, if you don’t look too closely. There’s a complex set of contradictions here. Middle class parents often feel they must pay for their children’s college to give their kids a toehold on the future. But it’s a time when costs are high and rising. The mid-20th century idea of “putting yourself thorough college” usually seems only within reach by students taking out massive loans. Upon graduation, with debt and debt service, college grads form a new class of indentured servants.

While in college, students are put in the position of trying to imagine or guess what they might study to be prepared for future employment. But in many fields, more and more overseas outsourcing takes over the jobs. Some people beat the drums for STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics), for example, but many of the tasks done by the worker bees in those fields can be and are outsourced. Similarly, jobs that used to be thought of as needing to be done on site, such as accounting, can be done elsewhere in a digital bookkeeping world. Media production, once thought of as local, is now easily moved anywhere with lower labor costs. Just look at the end credits for any spectacle and special effects movie.

The real crunch, and where the most important center for effective resistance and change lies, is the university labor situation. Unionization of faculty is now expanding into new areas: state schools that were once thought impervious to labor organizing are now opening up. Systems that once paid only token attention to lecturers and adjunct faculty now realize that at least two-thirds of teaching in many colleges is now done by faculty off the tenure track. These folks must be an integral and strong part of the union. And often graduate teaching and research assistants are already an organized labor force. Another new development is the effort to organize part-timers by region, recognizing that they form a coherent labor pool even when teaching at different campuses under different specific rules and situations.

Neoliberalism’s relentless logic is to privatize everything, including social goods such as education and health. Resistance to it can be built on the combination of self interest and group affiliation connected to clear social goals. The crisis politics, panic fixes, churning discourse, and hiding of the economic stakes can be confronted by insisting on careful analysis, methodical procedures, reasoned thinking, open discussion, looking for

underlying causes, accounting for complexity in systems, and respectful attitudes to all the participants. All of which, not so incidentally, are exactly what colleges and universities are supposed to be doing anyway.

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